

Isaiah 44:4-6

Psalm 86

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Parables all the way down

The need for “interpretation” is felt by anyone who reads the Scriptures. This is, sometimes, because we find in the Scriptures things we simply do not understand; the “plain sense of the text” is not plain at all to us. Other times, we understand the plain sense very well, and find that Scripture has us in its teeth. Interpretation – now a kind of *rationalisation* – is required in order that we escape that threatening situation.

We see “interpretation” operating in our reading today. Jesus has told the parable of the wheat and the weeds. There is a break in the reading as we heard it (filled with a number of other shorter parables we skipped over) and then the disciples ask for an interpretation of the parable: this is apparently a case of the plain sense not yet making sense to them.

Many biblical scholars question whether the explanation Jesus gives is, in fact, Jesus’ own sense for the parable, or whether it is Matthew’s. The fundamental issue is this: why bother telling parables if you are then going to “explain” them in “plainer” terms? This treats the parables as mere allegories which hide some deeper meaning. But why not simply go straight to the deeper meaning?

As it happens, the allegorical reading which Jesus – probably *Matthew* – offers here is not a very good one. It is implied that the sower creates the good people out of the good seed and the enemy creates the bad out of the weed seed, as if there are two creators, two kinds of people. A closer allegorical reading would be that we are all *the soil*, into which good and bad seed is planted. This creates a complex, blended humanity in which it is impossible to distinguish precisely what is good and what is not until God’s final and decisive action.

But which reading of the parable is better doesn’t really matter for my purposes this morning. More important is whether we *can* actually pluck a simpler allegorical meaning out of the parables.

When we hear from the gospel itself about why Jesus used parables, two apparently contradictory reasons are given. Asked directly about this – in the midst of last week’s reading – Jesus responds,

13.13 The reason I speak to them in parables is that “seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.”¹⁴ With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

*“You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.*

*15 For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.”*

That is, the parables seem to be told to *conceal*.

Yet, a little later in the same chapter we hear the evangelist Matthew give an explanation:

13.34 Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. 35 This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.'

Here, the parables are told to *reveal*. Jesus, then, seems to tell the parables in order that the truth be *hidden* from those who cannot hear or see while, at the same time, using parables to *reveal* what has been hidden from the beginning.

The only thing which will make sense of this contradiction is if the parables themselves are central – *as parables* and *not* as things to be “interpreted”: a kind of revealing *in* the hiding. The *hiding* is that *the parable* carries the truth, as a parable, and not some deeper meaning. What is revealed is that this is the *only way this* truth can be conveyed.

It is common for us to dismiss the parables as pictorial representations of deeper truths, colourful ways of representing the truth for the simple: theory and doctrine for the profound, stories and images for the uncomplicated – for children and the childlike.

But there is none of this in the gospels: the parables are a form Jesus directs at both the simple *and* the sophisticated: “To what shall we compare the kingdom of heaven?” A sower, a mustard seed, a pearl, a woman who loses a coin, a wedding banquet... There is very little “doctrine” in Jesus’ teaching.

As we look to “interpret” the parables, we seek the firm ground underneath the imagery, truth “hidden” from view but which carries the parable. Here we might be likened to the ancient Asian philosophers who wondered what it was upon which the earth rested, and concluded that it must be something like a great turtle, and imagined that the problem was solved. Of course, it occurs occasionally that someone asks what such a turtle would be standing on. The half-joking, half-serious answer is, It’s turtles all the way down.

Our interpretations seek the great turtle “under” the parable images. Upon what deeper truth do *they* rest? To this pressing question of interpretation the gospel answers, half jokingly, half seriously: It’s parables all the way down.

Our push to interpret, to understand, is a push to make God appear as the ground under the image. But a parable is a way of talking about God in which God never appears. What does appear – seeds, weeds, sowers, soils, birds, yeast, treasure, pearls – these serve for “comparisons” to God and his kingdom, but we get no closer than that.

In his use of parables Jesus honours the second commandment: Do not carve God in eternal stone. God is “presented”, in contrast, in the most fleeting of things – words. Or perhaps, more to the point, in the even more fleeting connections between words, between images.

Christian life and confession are built like this, out of things like this. “This is my body, broken for you”. What does this mean?

It means, “I believe in God the Father, creator of heaven of earth”.

But what does *that* mean?

It means, “Your sins are forgiven?”

But what does *that* mean?

“Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.”

But what does *that* mean?

“Lost in wonder, love and praise”

But what does that mean? ...

The word “parable” literally means a “throwing alongside”, a “heaping up”, of things. Christian speech about God and experience of God, is *Parable*.

And *we ourselves* are Parable: thrown alongside each other, heaped together, good seed, bad seed, friends, enemies. To what shall we compare the kingdom of God? A professor and a mechanic and an asylum seeker and a prostitute and a teacher and a vagrant and a little girl are thrown together – are *parabolised* – and they gather around a table. And they are given a parable to eat and to drink. And they become what they eat. And the world is suddenly *theirs*, and they are *for* the world: thrown-alongside, heaped together, the good seed with the bad, the good *for* the bad, so closely bound together that to pull up the one would be to pull up the other.

In this way God parabolises us and all things – heaping himself in with us, heaping us upon each other, throwing us in alongside the world.

This is how God gives himself. Let us rejoice in his, and so allow ourselves to become something to which God’s kingdom might be compared, that others might share in that joy.
